

## REVISITING THE UNPARDONABLE SIN: INSIGHT FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE

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**Abstract:** *Jesus's indictment of the "eternal sin" of blaspheming the Holy Spirit has perplexed his church from the beginning, leading to a variety of interpretations. Most of these interpretations have attempted to soften the harshness of Jesus's indictment by redefining the unpardonable sin or by supplying the unwritten premise "unless they repent." This article, by contrast, seeks to concede the sharpness of Jesus's verdict and then asks what there was about the Pharisees' offense that prompted it. To answer this question, this article looks to the ancient rhetorical treatment of apodeixis. Jesus's opponents were the beneficiaries of an extraordinary measure of both verbal and apodictic light. To this maximum light they responded with maximum rejection. This unique combination of maximum light and maximum rejection is what prompted Jesus's adamant verdict. Because these maximal conditions can no longer be met, the "eternal sin" of the Pharisees cannot be reenacted today.*

**Key words:** *unpardonable sin, unforgivable sin, eternal sin, Pharisees, blaspheming the Spirit, rhetoric, persuasion, evidence, demonstration, proof, faith*

Few of the Bible's declarations have vexed its readers more than this one: "Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt 12:32).<sup>1</sup>

This is a startling claim, and a puzzling one. Echoed in Mark 3:28–30 and Luke 12:10, its cryptic judgment seems to run counter to the rest of the NT. Everywhere else the NT emphasizes grace and forgiveness. Only here does Jesus so abruptly and conclusively slam shut the door to heaven. Hence the perennial questions: What exactly *is* this "eternal sin," and why is it alone unpardonable?<sup>2</sup>

For some, these questions are exegetical and theological; they seek to understand Christ's enigmatic declaration and how it fits with the rest of his teaching. For others, the questions are more personal and existential. The notion of an unpardonable sin frightens them. They seek answers because they fear they or someone they know may have committed this unforgivable offense. Theirs is the question countless pastors have heard through the centuries: "Is it possible for this sin to be committed today?"

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine: "Perhaps there is not in all holy Scripture found a more important or more difficult question" (*Homilies on the Gospels*, NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6:320).

From the earliest Church Fathers to the medieval scholastics, to Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformation sources today, the church has attempted to address this question. The answers on offer have been many and varied,<sup>3</sup> but I will not attempt to survey them here. My goal in this article is more modest. In what follows I aim to provide some fresh insight into a common—and, in my view, the most plausible—understanding of the unpardonable sin: what it is, why it is unforgivable, and whether it remains a threat today.

### I. AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE

The fresh support I have in mind stems from what may be for many an unexpected source: the field of Greco-Roman rhetoric. This source is unexpected because the dimension of the rhetorical tradition I want to highlight is often slighted in the field of biblical studies. When modern biblical scholars turn to the subject of rhetoric, they tend to do so for the purposes of rhetorical criticism. In this study, I want to draw on the ancient rhetorical tradition in a different way. This difference requires a bit of explanation.

The goal of the rhetorical critic is to employ the insights of ancient and modern rhetoricians to elucidate the biblical author's rhetorical strategies, that is, to reveal how the writer is using language to accomplish his purposes with his readers. Over the past half century, this application of the rhetorical tradition has become ubiquitous in biblical studies. But rhetorical criticism is not the only contribution the field of rhetoric has to offer biblical studies. To catch this important point, we need to focus for a moment on our terminology.

The semantics of the terms *rhetoric*/*rhetorical* are notoriously slippery, not least because they denote an enormously complex, multi-dimensional subject. To help sort through these complexities, philosopher Maurice Natanson identified four distinguishable “aspects” of rhetoric, ranging from the narrowest to the broadest: (1) persuasive intent; (2) the technique of persuasion; (3) the general theoretical rationale of persuasion; and (4) the philosophy of rhetoric. Says Natanson:

Rhetoric in the narrower aspect involves rhetorical intention [1] in the sense that a speaker or writer may devote his effort to persuade for some cause or object. Since much of what is commonly called “bad” rhetoric frequently is found in such efforts, the field of rhetoric understood as the technique of persuasion [2] is systematically studied and taught. Here the teacher of rhetoric investigates the devices and modes of argument, the outline for which is to be found in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* or other classical rhetorics. Reflection of a critical order on the significance and nature of the technique of persuasion brings us to rhetoric understood as the general rationale of persuasion [3]. This is what might be termed the “theory” of rhetoric in so far as the central principles of rhetoric are exam-

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief summary, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary* (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; Hermina; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 206–209. For more extended summaries, see Nicholas Lammé, “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: The Unpardonable Sin in Matthew 12:22–32,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 23 (2012): 19–51; William W. Combs, “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 57–96.

ined and ordered. The emphasis is on the general principles of rhetoric as rhetoric is intimately related to functional, pragmatically directed contexts. Finally, we come to the critique of the rationale of rhetoric which inquires into the underlying assumptions, the philosophical grounds of all the elements of rhetoric. It is here that a philosophy of rhetoric [4] finds its placement.<sup>4</sup>

Natanson's four aspects provide a helpful taxonomy of concepts. Rhetorical situations, defined by their persuasive possibilities, give rise to rhetorical intentions in a communicator (aspect 1). To help communicators follow through on these intentions, thinkers over the centuries have wrestled with rhetoric at the level of behavior (rhetorical "devices and modes of argument," aspect 2); or more abstractly at the level of theory ("general rationale," aspect 3); or more abstractly still, at the level of relating such behavior and theory to their underlying philosophical assumptions (aspect 4).

This parsing of the aspects of rhetoric is what prompts my observation that the rhetorical tradition has more to offer biblical scholars than rhetorical criticism. Such criticism focuses on Natanson's *first* and *second* aspects, namely a given author's rhetorical intent and the rhetorical "devices and modes of argument" he employs to achieve it. But the other two aspects of the tradition may also be useful, each in its own way, to our study of the Bible.

In this article, I want to focus on a type of study that draws on the *third* of Natanson's aspects: rhetorical theory.<sup>5</sup> My goal in what follows is to explore how an ancient (and modern) theoretical insight may actually help us understand the nature of the unpardonable sin, and therefore, why it should be unpardonable. With this insight in hand we may then be in a position to determine whether this offense can still be committed today.

## II. THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Let us begin by summarizing what the Synoptic accounts<sup>6</sup> tell us about the unpardonable sin. The Gospels provide the following information:

<sup>4</sup> "The Limits of Rhetoric," in *The Province of Rhetoric* (ed. J. Schwartz and J. A. Rycenga; New York: The Ronald Press, 1965), 65. I have added the bracketed numbers to help distinguish Natanson's four aspects of rhetoric.

<sup>5</sup> For an investigation involving Natanson's fourth category, the philosophy of rhetoric, see Duane Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Rhetoric in Ancient Corinth* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015). This work is an update and expansion of an earlier book, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Light of Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (SNTSMS 79; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> The relation between and among these accounts (as to historicity, chronology, geographical location, and dependency) is complex and widely debated. We need not engage these debates here. Beyond a working assumption that each of these passages records authentic sayings of Jesus, our particular focus does not require a choice among the options. For a summary of these options see Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (2 vols.; BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:1067-1071. Bock considers the view that these three accounts describe a single event that Matthew locates chronologically, but Mark and Luke locate topically, as the "most satisfactory" (p. 1070).

1. *The crowd's response.* The immediate context in all three passages shows the crowd's fascination with Jesus. From the beginning his exorcisms produced a particularly dramatic response: "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel" (Matt 9:33). "The crowd was amazed," says Luke (11:14). Their question: "Could this be the Son of David?" (Matt 12:23).

2. *The Pharisees' accusation.* The crowd's response alarmed the religious leaders who opposed Jesus and prompted from "some" of them (Luke 11:5) a refutation. They accused Jesus of doing his exorcisms, not by the power of God but by the power of Satan (Matt 12:24 // Mark 3:22 // Luke 11:15; cf. Matt 9:34; 10:25). Matthew identifies this accusation as coming from the Pharisees (12:24). Mark describes the accusers as "teachers of the law" who had come from Jerusalem (3:22).

3. *Jesus's indictment.* Jesus responds to this accusation in two ways. First, he identifies it for what it is: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Second, he distinguishes this blasphemy from every other sin, including other blasphemies. "Every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven," including speaking "a word against the Son of Man"<sup>7</sup> (Matt 12:32 // Mark 3:28 // Luke 12:10). The one sin that will never be forgiven, on the other hand, is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit: "Anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt 12:31–32); "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29; cf. Luke 12:10).<sup>8</sup>

4. *Jesus's family.* It is noteworthy that Jesus's family plays a cameo role in the context of all three passages, occasioning in each instance an affirmation of the importance of obedience to God's revealed word. When the arrival of his mother and brothers interrupts his teaching, Jesus points to his disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:46–50 // Mark 3:31–34; cf. Luke 8:19–21). In Luke, it is the exclamation by someone in the crowd ("Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you") that introduces Jesus's family into the narrative and prompts Jesus's response: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:27–28).

5. *Demand for signs.* In Matthew and Luke, Jesus rebukes the religious leaders—and the "wicked and adulterous generation" they represent—for pressing him to provide them with attesting signs (Matt 12:38–39 // Luke 11:28–29). In both cases, Jesus refuses their request and declares that the only sign they will receive will be the sign of the prophet Jonah: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the

<sup>7</sup> E.g. "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Matt 11:19); "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:21); cf. Matt 26:65 // Mark 14:64; Aquinas, *ST II-II.14.1*. On the complex issues surrounding the expression "Son of Man," see I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 515–21.

<sup>8</sup> In Luke, unlike Matthew and Mark, the opponents' attribution of Jesus's exorcisms to Satan (11:15) is separated from Jesus's declaration of its unforgivability (12:10). But the unified focus of the intervening material and the text's tight sequence of intervening events—not to mention a comparison with the other two accounts—ties the two together. The declaration of 12:10 is Jesus's response to the Pharisees' earlier accusations that "he casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons."

belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:39–40; cf. Matt. 16:4; Mark 8:12; Luke 11:29–30).

6. *Trusting the verbal witness.* Similarly, in both of these passages Jesus contrasts his generation’s demand for attesting signs with “the men of Nineveh” and “the queen of the South.” Jesus commends these unexpected figures for their willingness to respond to God on the basis of the declared witness of his appointed representative without demanding corroborating evidence (Jonah 3; 1 Kgs 10:1–10). For this, Jesus says, both the men of Nineveh and the queen of the South will rise up at the judgment to give testimony against his sign-demanding generation because of its stubborn refusal to trust the word of “one who is greater” than either Jonah or Solomon.

### III. THE DEMAND FOR PROOF

These passages demonstrate a juxtaposition common to the overall biblical witness. Jesus’s censure of those who demand proof is set over against his affirmation of those who “hear the word of God and obey it.” It is the familiar contrast succinctly summarized by the apostle Paul: “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). “Have you believed because you have seen me?” Jesus asked Thomas after he had satisfied Thomas’s demand for proof. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

According to the Bible, people of faith of every generation are those who are willing to believe God by recognizing his word *as his word*, and then trusting that word because of whose word it is.<sup>9</sup> The wise man, Jesus said—the one constructing his house on the rock rather than the sand—is the one “who hears these words of mine and does them” (Matt 7:24). Finding God’s word insufficient and demanding that he provide proof (“sight”) is the opposite of faith (Rom 4:13–25). The hope of the believer is built, not on “the seen” but on “the unseen”; that is, on what believers know to be true because God has said it is so (Rom 8:24–25).

This willingness to trust God’s word rather than demanding to “see it for myself” is the essence of what the Bible means by faith. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1–2). The conviction and assurance of the faithful is based, not on what they are able to see for themselves but on the revealed word of God. It was for their willingness to trust that word, without demanding sight, that “the people of old received their commendation” (Heb 11:2; cf. Rom 4:16–25). So serious does God consider this issue that without a willingness to take him at his word “it is impossible to please [him]” (Heb 11:6). This is why Jesus condemned his “wicked and adulterous generation” for their refusal to do so. Instead of trusting him and his word, they demanded sight.

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. Jesus’s prayer for his disciples: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words (*ῥήματα*) that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me” (John 17:6–8).

They insisted on the corroborating evidence of attesting signs. They wanted to “see things for themselves,” thereby relieving them of having to trust Jesus’s word.

#### IV. THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

This demand for corroborating evidence should not surprise us. It is a quintessential feature of what it means to be human, a tendency we all share. How many times have we heard, or ourselves repeated, the old slogan: “Seeing is believing.” “I’m from Missouri—show me,” we all say, whether we are from the show-me state or not. It is our way of declaring, “Don’t expect me to take your word for it; I want to see it for myself.”

This human inclination was well understood by the ancient rhetoricians. In fact, according to Aristotle, enabling the audience to “see it for themselves” constituted the essence of the art of persuasion. In the best-known ancient treatise on how this works, the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle says that the art of rhetoric may be defined as “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”<sup>10</sup> Aristotle viewed rhetoric as the counterpart of dialectic, or “a sort of division or likeness of Dialectic, since neither of them is a science that deals with the nature of any definite subject, but they are merely faculties (δυνάμεις) of furnishing arguments (λόγοι).”<sup>11</sup> These arguments take the form of proofs (πίστις). What constitutes a proof? Or, in so many words, how are people persuaded? Aristotle states rhetoric’s fundamental premise this way: “Proof (πίστις) is a sort of demonstration (ἀπόδειξις), since we are most strongly convinced when we suppose anything to have been demonstrated (ἀποδεδειχθαι).”<sup>12</sup>

The term ἀπόδειξις is an important one here. From it is derived our English word, *apodeictic* (usually shortened to *apodictic*), which means something like, “demonstrably true.” People tend to believe what they “see,” said Aristotle, or at least what they think they see. Thus, persuasion always rests on some form of “sight.” This sight is generated by demonstrative proofs or arguments. The task of the persuader is to discover these proofs and make use of them to effect belief within his audience. To instruct speakers in how to do so is the purpose of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

Like Plato, Aristotle held that it is the task of persuaders to produce (ποιέω, “to create, bring into existence”) belief.<sup>13</sup> Hence in his discussion of the essential parts of a speech he concludes that there are really only two: the statement of the

<sup>10</sup> 1.2.1 [Freese, LCL].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 1.2.7; cf. 1.1.14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 1.1.11. The term πίστις is part of the family of words related to the verb πιστεύειν, which means to trust, put faith in, to believe that, or believe in. The semantic shadings of πίστις are therefore subtle. For our purposes, the relevant meanings of πίστις are “faith,” “belief,” or “conviction.” The word refers to the state of trusting someone or something, or having been persuaded of something. In some settings πίστις shifts to that which generates faith, belief or conviction, that is, that which creates a basis for trust. Hence: “a pledge” or “guarantee”; or in a rhetorical context, a “means of persuasion” or a “proof.” But see also in the *Rhetoric* (1.2.8; 2.1.3, 5) πίστις as “conviction.” Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 5.10.8) understood πίστις as the equivalent of the Latin *fides* (faith, or credibility). In this way “faith” and the “basis for faith” shade into one another in the term πίστις.

<sup>13</sup> 1.2.8; cf. 2.1.1–7; Plato, *Phaed.* 271A; *Gorg.* 453A.

speaker's subject and the proof (πίστις) through demonstration (ἀπόδειξις).<sup>14</sup> Persuaders cannot expect the listener merely to take their word for things; the audience will not be persuaded by a mere claim or assertion that such and such is the case. If listeners are to believe something they expect to be shown proof or “demonstration.” The persuader’s task is to enable the listeners to see for themselves that a claim is true by providing them with sufficient grounds for belief.

It’s important to observe that Aristotle was correct on this point, and rhetoricians have echoed him ever since.<sup>15</sup> As the philosopher David Hume famously put it, “A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.”<sup>16</sup> If humans are expected to believe something, they typically demand to see *apodictic* (i.e. demonstrative) evidence that it is true. Such evidence can take many forms,<sup>17</sup> but these need not detain us here. It is enough for our purposes to identify this core theoretical insight of the rhetorical tradition. In one way or another, “seeing” truly is believing. This is how human persuasion works.

This is a commonsense insight we all know and intuitively understand. What’s more, it’s a rhetorical insight free people must appreciate. The ancients regularly underlined an important truth: the art of persuasion is what replaces tyranny and coercion in free societies.<sup>18</sup> If now, as then, there are those who use this art dishonorably, like the ancients we must not allow that to blind us to its importance. The democratic marketplace of ideas depends on its free exercise and rightly honors those who do it well and honestly.

It is also important to recognize that the Bible nowhere teaches that this desire for sight is inherently unworthy. On the contrary, it should be viewed as a God-given aspect of what it means to be human. It is only when this element is shanghaied by human pride and turned against God that it becomes a problem. When exercised in submission to God, our rational capacities are best viewed as a mark of the *imago Dei* in humans. Rightly employed, they honor and please God.<sup>19</sup> When this rational capacity is deployed against God, however, the picture shifts dramatically. This capacity becomes the prime instrument of human rebellion, the chief means by which humans attempt to ward off the hand of God (Rom 1:21–22;

<sup>14</sup> *Rhet.* 3.13.1, 4.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. see Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 1–10.

<sup>16</sup> *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Of Miracles*, 1.87.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. see Aristotle’s extended discussion in the *Rhetoric* (1.2.2–6 and *passim*) of *logos*, *pathos*, *ethos*, and their many variations.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Isocrates’s eloquent defense of the art of persuasion, *Nicoles* 5–9.

<sup>19</sup> This is what rescues this biblical stance from ill-informed accusations of “fideism.” Fideism is not a technical term and thus enjoys no standard definition. But when it is used as a term of opprobrium, the accusation typically implies a disdain for human reason, as in the famous quote attributed to Tertullian: “I believe because it is absurd” (*credo quia absurdum*). This is somewhat of a slander of Tertullian; see Eric Osborn, “Tertullian,” in *The First Christian Theologians* (ed. G. R. Evans; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 144–45. But in any case, the Scriptures nowhere call for any such *sacrificium intellectus*. According to the Bible, the human problem is essentially an issue of the moral will, not the intellect. For an extended discussion of these issues, see Litfin, *Paul’s Theology of Preaching*, 179–81, 265–67, 334–38.

1 Cor 1:20–21; 2:6; 3:19; 2 Cor 10:5; cf. Isa 19:12; 44:25). When this happens, the demand to “see it for myself” instead of trusting God’s word constitutes an affront to God. It becomes an expression of humanity’s prideful bid for autonomy that God typically refuses to accommodate.

## V. UNBELIEF AND APODICTIC PROOF

With this observation in hand, let us return to the unpardonable sin. The above analysis may offer some helpful insight into the nature of that sin and whether it can be committed today. It is important to observe that God’s unwillingness to accompany his word with apodictic evidence is not absolute. The Bible offers ample testimony to the fact that, while God wills that humans should take him at his word, he has often as a mark of his grace seen fit to provide struggling, rebellious humans various degrees of demonstrative evidence. In fact, it is in the varying human responses to that evidence that we may find the key to understanding the unpardonable sin.

We cannot here survey the full biblical record on this point, but the abundant testimony of the Gospels is sufficient to demonstrate the range of human responses to the apodictic evidence God provides. This range extends from eager and ready belief at one end of the spectrum, through increasing degrees of active unbelief, all the way to lethal rejection at the opposite end. This spectrum is a reminder that, like cancer, unbelief, though often curable, can in extreme cases become terminal. Consider this range of examples:

1. *Simple belief without apodictic proof.* We have noted the strong biblical emphasis on the importance of taking God at his word without demanding proof. This is the humble faith Jesus repeatedly extolled in his teachings about children. Jesus thanked God for the simple trust of the “little children” (Matt 11:25), a response he set in contrast to the stubborn unbelief of those cities “where most of his mighty works had been done.” Despite the abundance of apodictic evidence these cities enjoyed, the people there remained unrepentant (Matt 11:20–24). What they lacked was the humble, guileless trust Jesus found in children. It is to those “little ones” who demonstrate this sort of childlike trust, Jesus said, that the kingdom of heaven truly belongs (Matt 18:1–6; 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Conversely, those who refuse to “become like children ... will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3; Luke 18:17).

2. *Partial unbelief and apodictic proof.* Jesus commended the simple and willing trust of children. But every follower of Jesus can identify with the father of the demon-possessed son who cried out, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). So it was with Thomas the apostle. He was torn between his belief and his unbelief; hence his demand for apodictic evidence: “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”



Thomas knew Jesus's teaching about his resurrection<sup>20</sup> and had heard the testimony of the others that the Lord had indeed risen from the grave. Yet Thomas demanded to see the evidence for himself. Eight days later Jesus granted his demand: "Put your finger here," he said, "and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe" (John 20:27). The result was an abrupt reversal by Thomas. The apodictic force of this proof drew from the wavering apostle one of the strongest affirmations of Jesus to be found in the Gospels: "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus's willingness to grant Thomas's demand, combined with the apostle's dramatic response, shows that Thomas's bent was *toward* belief: he was willing to believe, and actually wanted to believe. But his faith was weak. So Jesus provided him the apodictic evidence he requested. But Jesus did so only as a gracious concession to Thomas's weakness.<sup>21</sup> Intent on keeping the deficiency of Thomas's demands clear, Jesus proceeded to chide him for his insistence on "sight": "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:24–29).

3. *Oblivious unbelief and apodictic proof.* Consider the reaction of the Gadarenes to the apodictic evidence God provided them. Having watched the astonishing spectacle of Jesus driving demons from two tormented men into their herd of pigs, only to see the herd plunge to its death as a result, the Gadarene herdsmen fled to a local city where they "told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men." The result was that "all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region" (Matt 8:33–34). These people were understandably frightened<sup>22</sup> by this extraordinary *apodeixis* of Jesus's power. Unfortunately, instead of turning to him in faith, the best response they could muster was to implore him to leave them in peace.

4. *Ambivalent unbelief and apodictic proof.* Then there were the people of Nazareth (Mark 6:1–6). They were astonished by Jesus's word and his miraculous deeds:

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Matt 16:21; 17:22; Mark 8:31; 9:31; Luke 9:22. Cf. Jesus's expectations about the disciples taking him at his word: "You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' ... And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe" (John 14:28–29).

<sup>21</sup> In Thomas's defense, he was not alone in his post-resurrection desire for sight; see John 20:8–9, 11. Cf. Jesus's contrast between the disciples believing him on the basis of his word versus believing on the basis of their sight: "The words (τὰ ῥήματα) that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works (τὰ ἔργα) themselves" (John 14:10–11). In Luke 24:25 Jesus attributes the disciples' unbelief to a foolish unwillingness ("slowness [βραδεῖς] of heart") to believe God on the basis of his revealed word (cf. Luke 24:5–8); in Mark 16:14 the rebuke ("unbelief and hardness of heart") was due to the disciples' unwillingness, like Thomas, to believe the verbal testimony of "those who saw him after he had risen."

<sup>22</sup> It has often been observed that the exhibition of divine power in the Bible, even among the faithful, prompted human fright and had to be followed by the encouragement to "fear not" (e.g. Judg 6:23; Dan 10:12; Matt. 28:10; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10; Acts 27:24; Rev 1:17). Cf. Augustine's response to his (and his friends') prayer for healing from a severe toothache: "As soon as we fell on our knees in the spirit of supplication, the pain vanished. ... I admit I was terrified" (*Saint Augustine: Confessions* [trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 163).

“Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?” Yet they refused to embrace him. This was after all Jesus’s hometown and they could not see beyond the fact that he was one of their own. “Is not this the carpenter,” they asked, “the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” The result was that rather than being drawn to Jesus, the people of Nazareth “took offense (ἐσκανδαλίζοντο) at him.” Despite both his word and an abundance of apodictic proof, their familiarity bred only contempt. Mark records that Jesus “marveled because of their unbelief.” As a result of their refusal to receive him, Jesus withdrew the apodictic evidence he had previously provided the Nazarenes and ceased to “do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief” (Matt 13:58).

5. *Standard unbelief and apodictic proof.* Consider John’s comment on the general response of Jesus’s generation. The first half of John’s Gospel is arranged around seven apodictic signs Jesus performed in public: turning water into wine, healing the sick, healing the paralytic, feeding the multitude, walking on water, healing the blind, and raising the dead. Now, having arrived in Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus is portrayed as offering the crowd his final public teaching. He then retreats to prepare himself and his disciples for the ordeal ahead. It is at this poignant juncture that John looks back over Jesus’s public ministry and offers a summative assessment of the people’s response: “Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him” (John 12:36–37; cf. Luke 13:34). In other words, despite having witnessed multiple gracious displays of apodictic proof of who Jesus was, they still refused to receive him. As late as the crucifixion they were still demanding sight: “Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32; cf. Matt 27:42). Their failure to trust Jesus’s word, even when accompanied by dramatic corroborating evidence, represented a culpable blindness to the truth.

6. *Determined unbelief and apodictic proof.* Jesus’s Jerusalem opponents demanded, “If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus responded by observing that they already had his spoken word on the matter: “I told you, and you do not believe.” He then pointed them to the apodictic evidence he had also provided: “The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me. . . . If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me [i.e. my word], believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:25, 37–38). But this, as the record shows, they were unwilling to do. They were determined to reject both Jesus’s verbal witness and the apodictic evidence he provided to corroborate it.

7. *Terminal unbelief and apodictic proof.* Finally, we arrive at the type of unbelief manifested by those who blasphemed the Holy Spirit by ascribing Jesus’s exorcisms to Satan. Unlike all other forms of unbelief, Jesus pronounced their unbelief unpardonable. The question we must ask is, why? Amidst a vast sea of unbelief, what was so uniquely egregious about the Pharisees’ sin that Jesus deemed it an eternal sin, unforgivable in both this age and the age to come? The biblical evidence suggests that the answer may be twofold.

First, their sin reflected a depth of rebellion beyond any other. The unbelief exhibited in the attribution of Jesus's exorcisms to Satan represented the ultimate expression of the sin Paul describes in Romans 1: the human inclination to exchange "the truth about God for a lie" (Rom 1:18–25). Three times the apostle declares that as a result of this extreme preference for the lie, God gives up (*παρέδωκεν*, vv. 24, 26, 28) the unbelieving to their rebellion. And nowhere is this truer than in the case of the unforgivable sin. Ascribing Jesus's exorcisms to Satan represented the peak expression of this evil preference.

To grasp why this should be so, this observation must be paired with another. Those who committed this sin were the beneficiaries of the fullest measure of revelatory light. First, in addition to the light of general revelation (Rom 1:18–23), which is available to all, these Pharisees were privy to the extensive inscripturated revelation that had been bequeathed to them in their sacred writings. They were experts who had spent a lifetime searching these writings, all of which, Jesus said, bore witness to him (John 5:39). Second, the one now standing among them was the incarnate Word of God. He had come into the world as the very embodiment of revelatory light (Matt 4:16; Luke 1:79); he was the light which "shines in the darkness" (John 1:5), "the true light, which gives light to everyone" (1:9). Third, these men had been exposed time and again to the full glare of Jesus's word. They had heard, directly or indirectly, everything he had to say. And finally, fourth, they had witnessed in his repeated miraculous works an extraordinary wealth of apodictic proof of who he was, with his exorcisms being the most revealing of all.

At first glance, this last point may seem counterintuitive. Wouldn't healing a paralytic or raising someone from the dead carry *more* apodictic force than exorcising a demon? The answer would seem to be, no. Such miracles might be more visually dramatic, but they would only carry more apodictic force if Jesus's opponents refused to acknowledge what was taking place in his exorcisms. But this they did not do. They fully acknowledged that Jesus had driven out the demons. This should have been a more powerful demonstration of who Jesus was than even his healing or raising the dead. The fact that even this *apodeixis* was lost on them is the clearest indicator of the terminal state of their unbelief.

We can see this more clearly by considering another of Jesus's miracles. In the famous account of a paralytic's friends lowering him through the roof to Jesus (Matt 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–26), in recognition of the man's faith Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven you." This scandalized the scribes and the Pharisees who were present. They asked, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" To which Jesus replied, "Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the man who was paralyzed—I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home" (Luke 5:22–25). Which the man did, to the astonishment of all.

Here was a case where Jesus granted his opponents the apodictic force of a dramatic, observable healing as a way of lending credence to his verbal claim about the forgiveness of sins. This corroboration should have proved more than suffi-

cient. But the opponents' unbelief was so determined that even this level of demonstration left them cold. Others had performed such feats—or at least claimed to, or appeared to—so in their minds the apodictic force of the healing could be evaded. This in turn meant that, due to its invisibility, the claimed forgiveness could be rejected. It was a combination that enabled Jesus's opponents not only to maintain their unbelief but to intensify it.

It is significant that Jesus did not pronounce even this extreme level of unbelief terminal. The opponents' response to the paralytic's healing thus furnishes a helpful background for understanding the unbelief Jesus did declare terminal. Unlike the forgiveness of sins, Jesus's exorcism of demons was directly observable, so much so that his enemies did not even attempt to dispute it. Instead, they shifted their focus to the power by which the exorcisms had taken place: they accused Jesus of casting out the demons by the power of Satan. This was an incoherent claim on the face of it and Jesus easily parried it (Matt 12:25–29 // Mark 3:23–27 // Luke 11:17–22). But more important for our purposes is what this shifted accusation reveals about the Pharisees' terminal condition.

## VI. OPPOSITE EXTREMES

The Gospels portray these opponents as occupying opposite ends of two related continua. First, on the scale of revelatory light they were distinguished by their being the beneficiaries of the maximum exposure granted ordinary humans. Short of another Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38) or being caught up into heaven itself, it is difficult to imagine greater access to divine truth than theirs. In addition to their already lavish revelatory advantages, these Pharisees were granted that capstone demonstration of Jesus's identity: his exorcisms. The apodictic force of these exorcisms was virtually syllogistic: *Only God could exorcise demons;*<sup>23</sup> *Jesus exorcised demons; therefore, Jesus was demonstrating the power of God.* In this way, Jesus's exorcisms constituted a summative demonstration of his authenticity.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the unbelief of these opponents was such that even this maximal exposure to the light could not penetrate their darkness. If Jesus's exorcisms constituted the ultimate beam of revelatory truth—i.e. conclusive apodictic corroboration that he was from God and that his word was to be trusted—it still was not enough. Their unbelief was so extreme that they met this maximum exposure with its opposite: a maximum refusal of the Spirit's light.

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<sup>23</sup> A point the Pharisees readily affirmed, Jesus reminded them, when their “own sons” (οἱ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν, Matt 12:27 // Luke 11:19) conducted exorcisms. Some have argued that “your own sons” was a reference to Jesus's followers, but this interpretation seems strained. More likely these were literal sons (such as the “seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva” in Acts 19:13–16) or merely proteges (υἱοὶ can be understood either way). In either case, such was the determined unbelief of the Pharisees that, while uncritically granting that these other bizarre (see Josephus, *Ant.* 8.2.4–5) and counterfeit (cf. the assessment of the evil spirit in Acts 19:15: “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?”) exorcisms were the work of God, Jesus's straightforward—i.e. no incantations, no manipulation of material objects—and undeniable exorcisms they ascribed to Satan. It was a glaring contradiction Jesus wielded against them (Matt 12:27–28 // Luke 11:19–20).

<sup>24</sup> See Jesus's application of precisely this argument, Matt 12:28 // Luke 11:20.

This maximal rejection is what rendered the Pharisees' sin unique.<sup>25</sup> Others had witnessed Jesus's exorcisms and merely turned away in unbelief. This garden-variety unbelief was in fact part of a long-standing pattern. As Stephen would later declare to the gathering of his "brothers and fathers" (v. 2) who just moments later would stone him to death: "You stiff-necked people, ... you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51–52).<sup>26</sup> Israel's pattern of unbelief, repeating itself all over again now in Jesus's generation (John 1:11), constituted a grievous national sin. Yet as Jesus himself affirmed, even this calamitous failure was not irreversible (Matt 12:31–32 // Mark 3:28 // Luke 12:10).<sup>27</sup> There remained the possibility that the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, which would transcend the earthly life of Jesus (John 16:7–9), might arouse some from that "evil and adulterous generation" to receive Jesus as the Christ. For such unbelief forgiveness was still an option.<sup>28</sup>

The unbelief of those who blasphemed the Spirit, however, was not just more of the same; their resistance to the light was of a different order. They were intent not only on avoiding the "the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5); they were determined to extinguish that light (Matt 12:14). As a prelude to killing Jesus this required them to execrate that light by attributing its fullest display to Satan himself. Theirs was a malediction not only of Jesus (Matt 10:25) but of the Holy Spirit, the one by whose power Jesus had conducted the exorcisms (Matt 12:28).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Contra, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, who considered the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit to be a generic sin, one instance of a broader category, not to be equated with *certa malitia*, "set malice" (*ST* II-II.14.1; cf. III.86.1).

<sup>26</sup> That the unbelief involved in the murder of Stephen was not itself an unpardonable sin is indicated, if nothing else, by the fact that the young Saul of Tarsus was included among the complicit bystanders (v. 58). From there he quickly became the chief persecutor of the early Christians (Acts 8:1–3), which also proved forgivable.

<sup>27</sup> "There was a hiddenness to the display of glory in the incarnate Word" (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 130; cf. Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 517–18). That hiddenness was inherent in the veiling that took place in the incarnation (Phil. 2:5–8), a veiling Jesus took active steps to maintain (Matt 16:20; 17:9; Mark 7:36; 8:30; 9:9; Luke 5:14; 8:56; 9:21). This veiling perhaps had the effect of reducing the people's culpability: "Blaspheming Jesus directly may not have counted as harshly during his earthly ministry on account of the messianic secret" (Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 399 n. 81). Cf. 1 Tim 1:13: "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief."

<sup>28</sup> Contrast the following two passages: (1) "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29); and (2) "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The contrast reflected in these two statements constitutes neither a contradiction nor a change of sentiment on the part of Jesus. Nor yet did it signal a canceling of the former statement by the latter. These two passages pertained to two different groups: (1) those whose sin of blaspheming the Spirit was terminal; and (2) everyone else. Many of this latter and far larger group did in the end repent of their unbelief and find forgiveness (cf. Acts 2:38–41; 3:17–19; 13:38).

<sup>29</sup> The Gospels portray Jesus's entire life and ministry, from his birth to his death, as having been led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. E.g. see Matt 1:20; 3:16; 4:1; Mark 1:10, 12; Luke 2:27; 4:14, 18; cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Heb 9:14. While the Spirit's role in empowering Jesus was typically veiled, on occasion it manifested itself for all to see, as in Jesus's *apodeixis* of power over the forces of Satan in his exorcisms.

This reviling of the Spirit's work proved to be a fatal move. Kingdom issues were at stake. As R. T. France observes, Jesus's exorcisms not only exhibited his power over the forces of Satan; they also revealed "something of what is happening at the level of the supernatural power struggle which underlies the earthly ministry of Jesus."<sup>30</sup>

Jesus's control over demonic power speaks of the collapse of the βασιλεία τοῦ Σατανᾶ ... in the face of the incoming of the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. The power of Satan, hitherto a real (though not unlimited) force in the world, has entered terminal decline. ... The strong man is now bound, and his possessions left vulnerable to the stronger one who now confronts him. ... The ministry of Jesus thus represents the decisive turning point in the contest between good and evil for the control of the world and its people.

These were the eschatological stakes in Jesus's exorcisms. Says France, "In Jesus and his ministry the lines are clearly drawn, and the question turns out to be not simply one of rival interpretations of miracles, but of who Jesus really is." In his exorcisms Jesus was being shown by the Spirit to be the one in whom and through whom God's kingdom had arrived. This was the kingdom light the Spirit was beaming through Jesus.

Yet these Pharisees did not merely ignore, or turn away from, or fail to respond to the Spirit's light. They looked it full in the face—and consciously *spurned* it.<sup>31</sup> Theirs was not merely an error of judgment whereby they misread truth as error. Their sin was intentional. They *saw* God's Spirit at work in Jesus, recognized (at some level) it as such, and that recognition generated within them only hatred.<sup>32</sup> Instead of being drawn to the light, they repudiated that light in the strongest possible way. Thus for them no further options remained. In their exhaustive despising of the Spirit's revealing work they had unwittingly cut themselves off from their

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<sup>30</sup> Here and following, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 168–69.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin emphasized the intentionality of the unpardonable sin: "Shall any unbeliever curse God? It is as if a blind man were dashing against a wall" (John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [trans. William Pringle; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949], 2:75). Thus, says Calvin, this sort of "blind" offense can be forgiven. The sin that cannot be forgiven is the one committed with eyes wide open: "knowingly and willingly," "consciously" and "contrary to the conviction of their own mind." It is that sin wherein the perpetrator "purposely and maliciously [turns] light into darkness" out of "malice and virulent rage" against God (73–77). In his *Institutes* Calvin defines the unpardonable sin this way: "They sin against the Holy Spirit who, with evil intention, resist God's truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they cannot claim ignorance" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 2:617).

<sup>32</sup> "If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father" (John 15:24). We should note, however, that this hatred of God and the terminal rejection it generated was apparently true only of those who actively blasphemed the Holy Spirit. This category did not include all within the larger body of Israel's leaders (John 12:42). As Peter later said to his post-Pentecost audience, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ... Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:17–18).

only hope. They had isolated themselves on an island of unbelief from which there was no escape.

In their determination to shield themselves from God's conclusive revelatory light, Jesus's opponents recoiled to the furthest possible extent. They malevolently transformed the strongest evidence that Jesus was from God, into evidence that he was from Satan. They did not merely disbelieve God's graciously provided *apodeixis*; they turned it against him. It was as if a dying man were to despise as poison the only medicine that could save him.<sup>33</sup> It should not surprise us to hear his physician pronounce his condition terminal. The Pharisees had met God's maximum verbal and apodictic kindness with equally maximal repudiation. This response is what rendered their condition uniquely incurable.<sup>34</sup>

## VII. TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

The above analysis prompts two important questions. First, what was the essential nature of Jesus's verdict? Was the Pharisees' blaspheming of the Holy Spirit terminal because it was so offensive to God that he peremptorily pronounced upon its perpetrators an irreversible sentence of judgment?<sup>35</sup> Or, was it terminal due to a judicial hardening of the perpetrators such that no repentance would ever be forthcoming?<sup>36</sup> Or, less directly, was it terminal in the sense that some cancers become

<sup>33</sup> So Calvin: "Who turn the only medicine of salvation into a deadly venom" (*Harmony*, 76).

<sup>34</sup> Some seek to soften Jesus's seemingly absolute language in these passages by, in effect, supplying an unstated qualification: "Unless, of course, one repents of it." So John Nolland: "No doubt such blasphemy remains unforgivable only as long as it is sustained. It too may be repented of" (*The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 505). France takes a more agnostic position in his treatment of the Marcan passage: "Nor does this text offer any answer to the question whether this eternal guilt is irrevocable, or whether there is an implied clause 'unless he repents'; it might be possible to draw a little comfort from the fact that this saying ... does not explicitly rule out the possibility of repentance, but the saying is designed to convey warning, not reassurance" (*Gospel of Mark*, 176–77). But this softening of Jesus's uniquely adamant and explicit language ("will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come"; "will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin"), though common from Augustine, through Aquinas, to the contemporary Catholic Church (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994], 456), renders Jesus's grave declaration meaningless. If it is impenitence, even "final impenitence," that makes blaspheming the Spirit unpardonable, what is the difference between this sin and every other? All such impenitence is in this sense "unpardonable." In this way, the uniqueness of Jesus's declaration against blaspheming the Spirit is altogether lost. Truer to the text is Osborne's conclusion that forgiveness for the Pharisees' blaspheming the Holy Spirit "is not possible either now or in eternity. Jesus is speaking of the final judgement. They are under indictment now, and there is no chance that they will receive forgiveness when they stand before the *bēma* of God" (Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* [ZECNT 1; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010], 478).

<sup>35</sup> If, as Hebrews says, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (9:27), this option would presumably consist of Jesus bringing his eschatological verdict (cf. Matt 25:31–33, 46) into the present and imposing it preventively on these opponents. If this was in fact what was happening, it might suggest that Jesus's truncating of the timeline for judgment was not so unique after all. It would have the effect of placing his condemnation of the Pharisees in the company of other biblical incidents such as the Noahic flood, wherein, due to the extreme wickedness of that generation, God peremptorily brought to a close all further opportunities for repentance (Gen 9:11–13).

<sup>36</sup> So Calvin: "hardening the hearts of the reprobate, so that they never have any desire towards repentance" (*Harmony*, 77); cf. Ex 9:16; Rom 9:6–29. This reading, too, would have the effect of revising

terminal: that is, they are so far advanced that no prospects for recovery remain? Or yet again, was it terminal because, as in Rom 1:24–28, God simply abandoned the perpetrators to their own devices?<sup>37</sup> The information available in the biblical text would seem to leave us unable to decide among these options. In the end, however, deciding among them may not matter; the result is the same. However we answer the question, Jesus's verdict stands: the Pharisees' blasphemy of the Holy Spirit was irreversible. Theirs was an "eternal sin."

Second, there remains the age-old question of whether it is possible to commit the unpardonable sin today. According to R. T. France, the contemporary relevance of the unpardonable sin

depends on establishing how far a given situation is in principle comparable with the scribes' alleged perversion of the truth. To confine the use of these verses only to considerations of exorcism would be pedantic, but on the other hand it may safely be asserted that the vast majority of pastoral cases involving those who fear that they have committed or might commit 'the unforgivable sin' have little or nothing to do with what this saying is talking about. It is a warning to those who adopt a position of deliberate rejection and antagonism, not an attempt to frighten those of tender conscience.<sup>38</sup>

France is undoubtedly right to tamp down contemporary concerns about committing the unpardonable sin. Unfortunately, he does not press his point far enough. To be plausible, any interpretation of the unpardonable sin must account for the unparalleled vehemence and extremity of Jesus's verdict: All else can be forgiven—but *this* sin, *never!* What was so unique about the Pharisees' sin that, in radical contrast to every other transgression, it should receive such an ironclad verdict?

Whatever it was, it was surely something more specific than, as France suggests, adopting "a position of deliberate rejection and antagonism." Could there have been a purer example of "deliberate rejection and antagonism" than Saul of Tarsus? Yet Paul was not only forgiven, he was granted the ultimate measure of God's apodictic grace: a post-resurrection encounter with the exalted Christ himself. One could, in fact, describe without exaggeration the response of the entire nation as one of "deliberate rejection and antagonism." Was forgiveness to be withheld from that whole generation?

Surely, to prompt the extreme verdict of *no forgiveness—not ever*, the sin of Jesus's opponents had to be something more focused and intense than the generic rejection and antagonism Jesus received from so many others—and it is scarcely "pedantic" to say so. The more focused and intense answer we have suggested is

the uniqueness of the unpardonable sin. Even if the particular sin of the Pharisees cannot itself be duplicated (see below), according to this reading there would seem to remain the possibility that there could be other sins that would lead to a similar peremptory judgment (e.g. Josh 11:19–20).

<sup>37</sup> E.g., C. S. Lewis: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'" (*The Great Divorce* [New York: Macmillan, 1946], 72).

<sup>38</sup> *Gospel of Mark*, 177.



that in these blasphemers, maximal verbal and apodictic light was met with maximally resolute repudiation. This was the extreme condition Jesus pronounced unforgivable.<sup>39</sup>

If such was the case, the so-called unpardonable sin cannot be committed today. However determined one's unbelief, these maximal conditions can no longer be met. Jesus's opponents enjoyed the extensive inscripturated revelation found in their sacred writings, the physical presence of the incarnate Word of God, the full range of Jesus's earthly teaching, and direct exposure to all of his miraculous works, including the casting out of demons. A modern person enjoys the inestimable light of the apostolic writings, which we must consider a dramatic advantage over the Pharisees. But no contemporary humans have enjoyed any of the other advantages afforded Jesus's opponents. Thus no contemporary person has, or ever could have, experienced the level of revelatory light, both verbal and apodictic, these opponents enjoyed.

This, in turn, means that without maximal light, even determined resistance cannot qualify as maximal rejection. The latter entails and requires the former.<sup>40</sup> Hence the uniqueness of this unforgivable sin—even, we should note, in the NT itself. Hence also our ability to affirm C. E. B. Cranfield's important conclusion: "It is a matter of great importance pastorally that we can say with absolute confidence to anyone who is overwhelmed by the fear that he has committed this sin, that the fact that he is so troubled is itself a sure proof that he has not committed it."<sup>41</sup>

### VIII. LARGER IMPLICATIONS

In retrospect, the level of apodictic evidence God granted Jesus's opponents was quite literally extraordinary: it was *extra*-ordinary in the sense that the provision

<sup>39</sup> Some discussions of the unpardonable sin attempt to interpret Jesus's words in the context of the warnings of Heb 6:4–6 ("impossible to renew them to repentance"), Heb 10:26 ("deliberate sin"), Acts 5:1–11 (the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira), 1 Cor 11:30 (Paul's reference to those who "sleep"; cf. 1 Cor 15:6, 20), 1 John 5:16 ("the sin unto death"), the "high-handed" sin of blasphemy in the OT (on which, see Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 365–66), and even the testing of a prophet in the *Didache* (11:10–11). But the attempt to conflate the Synoptic accounts with such disparate references only complicates an already difficult interpretational task. All of these other references pose their own interpretational challenges and demonstrate their own uniqueness. What is more, none of them align comfortably with the specifics of the gospel accounts. Rather than flattening out these passages, as if all are addressing the same phenomenon, each must be given its due in its own context. When treated thusly, the uniqueness of the Synoptic accounts continues to stand out.

<sup>40</sup> This point is often missed, even in otherwise thoughtful treatments of the unpardonable sin. E.g. in his extended study of the work of the Holy Spirit, Abraham Kuyper devotes an entire chapter to "The Sin Against the Holy Ghost" in which he emphasizes the two extremes we have identified: "To commit this sin two things are required, which absolutely belong together: First, close contact with the glory which is manifest in Christ or in His people. Second, not mere contempt of that glory, but the declaration that the Spirit which manifests itself in that glory, which is the Holy Spirit, is a manifestation of Satan" (*The Work of the Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 612). The shortcoming of this description lies in its broadening of the revelatory issue to the more general category, "close contact with the glory which is manifest in Christ or in His people." Such generalizing represents a failure to appreciate the unique extent of the Pharisees' access to the light, and therefore their maximal culpability.

<sup>41</sup> *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 142.

of apodictic proof (much less this *degree* of apodictic proof) is not God's typical approach to dealing with human unbelief. His standard means of dealing with men and women is to provide them with his word and then expect them to respond accordingly.<sup>42</sup> To be sure, there have been many times and places where God has graciously provided apodictic evidence to corroborate that word, as evidenced supremely in the Pharisees. But this is not his preferred mode. God's stated preference is that we respond to him on the basis of what he has said.

Why should this be so important to God? The answer can be succinctly stated: human pride. Seeing may be believing, but this is not the kind of believing God seeks from his creatures. Apodictic proof prompts a response that is somewhat different from the faith God desires. In fact, it bears the potential of undermining the real thing. Demonstrative proof leaves humans in control: they do not need to trust God's word because they have seen things for themselves. If the evidence meets their requirements, they may be prepared to believe what God says. But such belief will be the result, not of trusting God, but of trusting what they have empirically seen for themselves. This sort of believing is something less than, or inferior to, the biblical concept of faith.

In his *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, John Chrysostom (c. 349–407)—a brilliant preacher who was formally trained in the art of rhetoric—addressed this very point. He understood Aristotle's definition of rhetorical *apodeixis* and takes pains to distinguish it from the "*apodeixis* of the Spirit and of power" Paul says empowered his preaching (1 Cor 2:4). This spiritual *apodeixis* did not consist, Chrysostom says, of miraculous signs and wonders, for these produce something different from the faith God desires. "If without signs [the apostles] wrought conviction, far greater does the wonder appear." When observers are convinced by miracles and wonders—in contrast to "discourse (τὸ λόγῳ) being the only instrument of conviction"—"necessity has done this, and the evidence (περιφάνεια, i.e. apodictic "conspicuousness") of the things seen." As Aristotle had said, people believe what they see, or think they see. Thus it "is not of [their] choice, but by the vastness of the spectacle the powers of the mind are dragged along. It follows that by how much the more evident and overpowering the [miracles], by so much is the part of faith abridged."<sup>43</sup>

Chrysostom's point is that genuine faith rests on "the unseen" (in this case, the heralded claims of the gospel), not "the seen" (signs and wonders). This was why, Chrysostom says, despite the fact that the apostles did sometimes work miracles, the *apodeixis* of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor 2:4 was a "spiritual" demonstration<sup>44</sup>—and why, Chrysostom goes on to argue, "miracles are not done now."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> E.g. see Luke 4:42–43; Rom 10:8–17; 1 Thess 1:2–13; 2:13. The distinction between taking God at his word and demanding apodictic proof is widely underappreciated today. Yet it is a crucial contrast, one that holds large implications for how we understand the nature of both the gospel itself and the act of evangelism. This understanding, in turn, bears further implications for Christian ministry in general. For an extended discussion of these issues, see Litfin, *Paul's Theology of Preaching*, *passim*.

<sup>43</sup> *Homilies on First Corinthians*, NPNF<sup>1</sup> XII:31.

<sup>44</sup> C. K. Barrett: The *apodeixis* of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor 2:4 was simply that "divine power" which gripped some of the hearers when Paul preached Christ and "constrained them to penitence and

Prideful human beings typically prefer seeing things for themselves over having to trust what God has said. But this haughty demand for sight is not something to be celebrated. God often grants humans apodictic proof to corroborate his word; he certainly did so in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, and the case can be made that he continues to do so around the world today. But the consistent testimony of the Bible is that, as with Thomas, the furnishing of apodictic evidence is always a concession to human weakness. Rather than demanding to see things for themselves, God calls humans to relinquish their imperious demands and, like a trusting child, respond to him on the basis of his revealed word. This is what the Bible means by faith. According to Jesus, the blessed are not those who have believed because they have seen; “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

### IX. CONCLUSION

Jesus’s stunning indictment of the “eternal sin” of blaspheming the Holy Spirit has perplexed his church from the beginning. The difficulty in interpreting its meaning stems from its uniqueness in the biblical record, its extreme severity, and the absence of any accompanying explanatory material. These features have inevitably led through the centuries to a wide variety of interpretations.

Most of these interpretations share a common feature: they attempt to blunt the sharpness of Jesus’s words by either redefining the unpardonable sin itself (e.g. by shifting it from the specific act of blaspheming the Spirit to some broader category such as impenitence), or by weakening Jesus’s verdict (e.g. by qualifying it with the unstated phrase, “unless they repent”). The above argument takes a different approach. Our goal has been (1) to interpret the unpardonable sin as what the gospels seem to say it is, the willful ascription of Jesus’s Spirit-empowered exorcisms to Satan;<sup>46</sup> (2) embrace the full severity of Christ’s judgment of that sin; and then (3) ask what there was about this particular offense that rendered it so uniquely deserving of such a verdict.

To help answer this question we have looked to the ancient rhetorical tradition. What we discovered there highlights the uniqueness of the Pharisees’ sin, setting it apart from other examples of unbelief. The biblical record shows that these opponents were the beneficiaries of the maximum exposure to the verbal and apodictic light of revelation. To this maximum light they responded with maximum rejection: They profaned the Spirit’s gracious provision of light by ascribing it to

faith; this was the work of the Holy Spirit” (*A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [BNTC; New York: Harper and Row, 1968], 66).

<sup>45</sup> *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 31. Cf. Aquinas’s similar argument, citing both Ambrose and Gregory, regarding the question of “whether Christ should have manifested the truth of his resurrection by proofs” (*ST III.55.5*).

<sup>46</sup> John Wesley: “How much stir has been made about this? How many sermons, yea, volumes, have been written concerning it? And yet there is nothing plainer in all the Bible. It is neither more nor less, than the ascribing those miracles to the power of the devil, which Christ wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost” (*Notes upon the New Testament* [New York: Soule and Mason, 1818], 45).

Satan. God's ultimate gift of the truth was met with the ultimate expression of the race's preference for the lie (Rom 1:18–32). This, we have suggested, is what rendered the Pharisees' sin incurable. This much can be plausibly argued from the information available in the biblical text.

The Bible does not, on the other hand, provide us sufficient grounds for specifying the exact nature of Christ's verdict. Was it a prevenient declaration of the eschatological judgment that awaited these opponents? Was it a pronouncement of a judicial hardening of their hearts? Was it simply Christ's diagnosis of a condition so far advanced that no recovery was possible? Or was it a divine ruling wherein God simply "gave up" the perpetrators to their own choices? We cannot say. The above analysis does permit us to conclude, however, that the unpardonable sin cannot be duplicated today. Because no contemporary persons have access to the maximum revelatory light God afforded the Pharisees, neither can they be guilty of its maximum rejection. The unpardonable sin recorded in the Synoptic Gospels was not only unique to the NT; it was also unique in the history of Christ's church and cannot be reenacted today.